

“To be good at public and domestic work, I need three heads and six hands”: Dilemma of Vietnamese “Modern” Women

Khuat Thu Hong, Bui Thu Huong, and Le Bach Duong

Institute for Social Development Studies, Viet Nam

Introduction

Unpaid domestic work (or labor) has drawn some scholarly attention in the past few decades. While its economic importance has been increasingly recognized, not only at the household but also at the community, national and global levels, domestic work has rarely come out in economic statistics. One reason for the lack of data is the difficulty in measuring these economic activities. At the conceptual level, domestic work continues to be considered as an undesirable area for research. Contributing to this “prejudice” is the fact that, worldwide domestic workers are predominantly women whose inferior social status has even been translated into their inferiority in scientific inquiries. In real-life circumstances, despite their substantial yet indiscernible contribution to the household’s and community’s welfare, domestic workers are practically viewed as “parasites” whose abuse and exploitation are constantly justified on “ungrounded” economic, social, political and religious grounds.

Since the birth of the modern Vietnam, fundamental social changes along socialist ideology have brought about considerable improvement in women’s status, both in family and public arenas. The market reform since the late 1980s has further elevated individual freedom to an extent unseen before. Yet, deep down at the cultural core, gender inequality remains practically intact. Among various forms of female inferiority, domestic work stands out as a clear reflection of this cultural conservatism. Various researches have shown that women, including girls, continue to shoulder most weight of housework. In fact, compared to the pre-reform period, women now assume more burdens such as child and elderly care as the socialist state has no longer be a free provider of such services.

This paper examines the perceptions and attitudes towards housework amongst married men and women of reproductive age in urban and rural Vietnam, the current situation of their involvement in domestic work, the value of domestic work in monetary terms, albeit remain unpaid. Based on a research with 600 married men and women from 300 households of an urban ward and a rural commune in the North of Vietnam, we argue that domestic work has

been constructed along the gendered division of labor within family and community. This division—specifies roles, functions, and tasks that men and women should undertake—is based on an “essentialist” notion that emphasizes the assumed biological difference between men and women. Women is constructed to be physically and mentally weaker compared to men, thus are naturally fit to works that requires ‘nimble fingers’ with care and patience. Men are viewed as being endowed with power and vision, thus should be the bread-winners and decision makers in family and communal affairs.

This essentialism is manifested most obviously in the domestic work domain where both men and women are socialized to believe that women are ‘naturally’ born to perform household chores. The dichotomy between what men and women can and cannot (or should and should not) do further defines what masculinity and femininity consist and mean. Doing housework is viewed as detrimental to the former and constructive for the latter.

While this dichotomy is somewhat eroded during the decades of socialist development when women were empowered to become producers and soldiers, it has to some extent been revitalized with the market reforms. As family reassumes its function of an economic entity, the deployment of labor between husband and wife has been reorganized to take the traditional forms which underscore the dependent position of wife to husband and her family-in-law. Despite the rapid feminization of the labor force recorded by the state’s official data, there is no evidence of significant change in the roles of men and women regarding domestic work. What has changed is the new double role that women must now assume—to be a contributor to family’s economic well-being and a bearer of most, if not all, household chores.

Housework in the Context of Vietnam

One of the key challenges for research on housework is how to conceptualize it, especially in its relationship to family’s well-being, gender construction, and the reproduction of society. From different perspectives, researchers have offered a range of different conceptualizations of household labor and housework. Yet a fairly consistent agreement has been reached that “housework most often refers to unpaid work done to maintain family members and/or a home” (Coltrane 2000).

The importance of housework to community and society has also long been recognized (Efroymson 2007). In the ground-breaking study of Reid (1934), a household activity would be considered as unpaid work with a monetary value if an economic unit other than the household itself could have supplied the latter with an equivalent service (Yun-Ae Yi, 1996). As such,

if this segment of the non-monetary economy¹ was measured in monetary terms, it would substantially increase GDP of every nation (Adgar 2002).

In addition to the financial value, housework also has its social importance. The unpaid work in the household can act as social ‘glue’ that helps binding family members together. Much of the unpaid work provides supports that would be difficult, if not impossible, to get in the market place (Lewis 2006). The sense of care, the flexibility of the support provided by housework performers, along with the feeling that people are not doing things merely for financial gain, can all provide something additional to the simple financial contribution of unpaid work (De Vaus et al. 2003). However, housework worldwide remains to be socially devalued and economically under-recognized, and housework performers often suffer various forms of discrimination and exploitation because they are performing the “invisible” work in the household (UNIFEM 1996; Monsod 2007).

One key feature of housework in most societies is that it is much gendered and disproportionately burdens women. It is perceived as a form of patriarchal oppression. Women are responsible for the greater majority of unremunerated domestic work, regardless of the fact that their participation in remunerated work in the formal and non-formal labor market has increased significantly (Mahalingam et al. 2002; David de Vaus et al 2003).

In Vietnam, market reforms (often known as Doi Moi, or economic renovation) since 1986 have brought about tremendous economic and social changes that have important impact on gender and family relations. The diversification of economic sectors, especially industrialization and privatization, has created unprecedented opportunities for women to participate in income-generating activities. However, women’s improved economic status does not necessarily lighten their socially-sanctioned responsibilities within the family. Many researches have noted that, compared to men, women continued to shoulder most obligations within the household, particularly reproductive tasks such as care taking and domestic work, especially when related state services have been cut-back, commercialized and partially privatized as part of Doi Moi policies (Tran and Le 1997; Long et al. 2000; Le 1996; Le 1998). It has even been argued that the return of the household to be an autonomous economic unit, as the result of Doi Moi, has reinforced the Confucian belief and practices regarding the “rightful” place of men and women in the household and in the society (Khuat 1998; Tran and Le 1997). In addition, as a

¹ The non-monetary economy includes not only labour but also the creation of a culture, a social asset. Whether we call it “collective efficacy” or “social capital,” there is a non-monetary infrastructure of trust, reciprocity, civic engagement that is just as real as the water lines and electric lines that can be measured in monetary terms. By definition, the non-monetary economy rejects market price as the measure of value. Normative values drive production and distribution in the Non-Monetary Economy (Adgar 2002)

reaction to changes in social and cultural norms, traditional gender roles are emphasized by the government as being critical to the social and political stability of the nation (Gammeltoft 1999; Long et al. 2000; UNFPA 2003; Le Thi 2004; Pham et al. 2005). For example, as argued by Bui Huong (2006), the government launched nationwide movements aimed at preserving and reinvigorating “traditions” in modern Vietnamese families. Accordingly, ‘women today’ have a vastly expanded role to play in contemporary Vietnamese society. They are exhorted to participate fully in economic, social and political activities alongside men, whilst still being expected to continue to fulfill their traditional role of maintaining harmony in the family (See Hoang and Schuler 2004).

Thus, the structuring of state policies surrounding the place of women continues in practice to reinforce gender inequality, by placing a traditionally inflected emphasis on the patriarchal framework that views women as closely tied to the domestic sphere, regardless of how high in the income ladder women may actually rise. For this reason, if for no other, a thorough investigation is required into how unpaid labor in the home is continuing to represent an unequal burden for women in striving to meet the twin demands of economic renewal alongside the preservation of the traditional structure of the Vietnamese family.

Research Data

For this research, we adopted both quantitative and qualitative methods, including a desk review and field research. A questionnaire was developed to collect quantitative information about housework, particularly the data help quantifying the (unpaid) monetary value of domestic labor. A number of detailed case studies, generated through participatory forms of observational research, also provide further information about the amount of time used by women for doing housework and perceptions and attitudes towards housework and women’s contribution. In addition, focus group discussions were also undertaken with community members.

Field data was collected over a one-week period starting in late October 2007. The study site include one urban ward, Nguyen Trai, in Ha Dong city and one rural commune, Dai Dong, in Thach That district of Ha Tay province southwest of Hanoi, the capital. Nguyen Trai ward is home of about 2,798 households with total population of 11,678 people, of them 4,792 are in working age. Most of the households in the locality earn their living from doing business and services and working in the state sector. Dai Dong has a population of 9,476 people in 2,465 households, with 5,023 people of working age. The main occupational activity in this locality is

agriculture which accounts for 50% in the job structure. The remaining is equally divided into industry, small scale industry and services.

At each study site, 150 households were randomly selected from a list of all eligible households. In each household, both husband and wife were interviewed, making a total of 600 respondents. Criteria for selection of households include (1) wife should be in reproductive age, (between 20–49), (2) wife should have given birth to at least one child, and (3) husband is at home at the time of the study.

In each site, participatory observations were undertaken at one household with two generations and one household with 3 generations in order for the researchers to observe and report all activities and events happening during 24 consecutive hours. In-depth interviews were conducted with 4 men and 4 women from 8 households at the two sites. Finally, two FDGs were organized, one with men of families with at least one child and another with women of families with at least one child. A total of 24 participants were covered in the FDGs.

Research Findings

Social Construction of Housework

A gender-based division of labor organizing domestic duties, which is both socially constructed and is usually associated with certain socio-cultural forms, has specified the roles, functions and tasks that men and women each undertake within the households, and in the wider society. This division is also based on the perceived biological “difference” between men and women with which the latter are presumed to be more ‘suited’ to work that requires patience, skill, and care associated with ‘nimble fingers.’ This perception is common among both men and women and is strongly supported, enhanced, and perpetuated through patriarchal socialization.

| <i>Daily domestic tasks</i> | <i>Wife</i> | <i>Husband</i> |
|-----------------------------|-------------|----------------|
| Nutrition care | 93 | 10 |
| Accommodation/ house care | 40 | 12 |
| Care for clothes | 37 | 6 |
| Care for family members | 122 | 59 |
| Travel and transportation | 34 | 7 |
| Total | 326 | 94 |

This belief is well reflected in the research findings, as 60% of males and 68% of females participating in the interviews agreed that 'doing housework is women's proclivity'; and 65% of the former versus 58% of the later considered 'men are those who decide the important business in the family.' As the result, men involve in much less extent in housework compared to women. For example, according to the research data, in average, a woman spends 326 minutes (about 5.4 hours) on housework everyday including cooking, cleaning, washing, mending clothes and taking care of the family members, tutoring the children and so on. In contrast, a man committed only 94 minutes (1.6 hours) in average to do housework. The tasks that men participate the most in are 'care for family members' (69 minutes per day) and 'Accommodation/house care' (16 minutes/ per day). However, even for these two specific tasks, the time spent on doing by women are about two to three times more. Table 1 specifies in detail the time spent on key five domestic works performed by men and women in our research. These works are based on categorization of 42 different domestic tasks proposed by Dulaney (1992).

Qualitative information provides some depth of this division of domestic labor. In one participatory observation exercise, a female researcher was introduced to a two-generation family. Both husband and wife are in their early 30s. They already have two children, a boy of the 7th form and a daughter of the 4th form. The wife is six-months pregnant. The husband is a carpenter and the wife is a sticky-rice seller. As observed, her day starts at 3.40 AM and finishes at 10.00 PM. During that time, the wife does not grant herself even a short respite. The same reality is also reflected in many in-depth interviews and focus group discussions undertaken within this study.

The story in Box 1 below is drawn from one of our in-depth interviews. Like many other women, Ms. Hai (a pseudonym) does not only participate in the activities to generate income for the household but also gets involved into other domestic work such as cooking, washing, tutoring, and caring for other family members including her husband's mother and siblings.

Hai is but one vivid example as there are other women and men in this study who share the view that women are always strongly 'attached' to housework and it has thus become the norm for women. However, in our interviews, women often have expressed their expectation to receive support and acknowledgement of the importance of domestic labor from their husbands and other family members. When being questioned about this issue, men themselves shared a 'modern' view regarding housework and informed us that they would be willing to help their wives whenever possible.

However, both men and women have put forward contradictory statements when exerting themselves to prove their more 'equal' division of household work. On one hand, the fact that

Box 1. Life of a rural woman

Ms. Hai, born in 1961, is a farmer, cultivating 10 *sao* (3.600 m²) of arable land for the family livelihood. In order to earn more, she sporadically does some hire-work for other households' farms in the same locality. She got married in 1979 and has four daughters. The first two are in college far from home. The third is a 10th grade pupil and the youngest is a 4th grade pupil.

After marriage, she moved to live with her husband's family, with his mother and younger brother and sister. Her mother-in-law was born in 1933. She is already old, so she hardly helps her with housework like cooking and reminding the children to study. Whenever she falls ill, Hai has to stay home, abandoning all of other jobs even the hired ones to take her to hospital and look after her.

She often gets up at 5 AM to prepare breakfast for the family. She then goes to the field after feeding pigs and chicken. At lunchtime she goes to the market to buy foods to cook lunch and dinner on the way home. If it is in harvesting time, she cannot get home until 8 PM and continues to work until 9–10 PM.

Normally, after dinner, feeding pigs and chicken, and having a bath, she reminds her children to study. She disclosed that she cannot teach them because of her limited education and time. She really wants her children to study well. Therefore, although she has to take a loan, work for somebody, contract more fields just in order to pay off two million VND of schooling expenses every month, she still wants her children to continue their study.

Hai wants her husband to share with the domestic work. Yet she told the interviewer, *“that kind of work is what I can do and it is not heavy work.”* She also affirmed, *“It is impossible for us, women, to sit relaxing and watching our husbands working but it is possible for the husbands to do so, and it is the same in every family.”*

they said they shared the work reflected to some extent changes in their awareness. On the other hand, many respondents, especially in the focus group discussions, affirmed that there were some tasks designed for women which women would be able to do better, and there are other tasks for men which women would not perform even when they wanted to.

Farmers are very busy at the cultivating and harvesting seasons. At the time, wives have to work very hard and men should participate as well. Other than that, they stay at home and do some odd jobs which do not bring in income so that their husbands can go out to work. Those tasks such as mending household equipment and appliances cannot be done by either wives or children while men can do them at ease. Therefore, it is not correct to say that men let their wives do all of non-monetary odd jobs. (FGD with married men,

Dai Dong)

At present, our parents allow us to live on our own. Thus, if my wife is busy I will have to do all the tasks such as cooking. Generally, I cannot earn any pennies at the moment. It takes me a whole day just to do odd jobs around the house. Men are clumsy, not as skillful as women, so it takes longer to do such jobs (FGD with married men, Dai Dong).

Also, from their perspective, some women think that sharing is ideal but only to some extent, for if men have to do the 'meticulous' tasks involved in housework, they would have to change their characteristics.

I do not like it either because I think that it is not advisable for men to do too much of such work because the work is very specific and meticulous. In so doing, they will become very strict and demanding more. On the contrary, if women do not have to do such work and become the bread winner of the family it will not be good either because they will not have time to look after their kids. Besides, it will be very exhausting and complicated. In my opinion, it is necessary to share the housework, whoever can do better will do it and it should not be loaded on one person (Female, aged 31, 2 children, Ha Dong)

One has to conclude, on the basis of the empirical findings of this study, that housework has consumed a lot of women's time, physical and mental strength, with little time to relax and reproduce their labor. Invariably in all the households that we approached in both quantitative and qualitative studies, housework was undertaken mainly by women and other family members, especially men, fulfill only a 'helper' role. As argued by Oakley (1987), as long as husbands consider themselves as 'helpers,' it is not difficult to envision to whom the responsibility is claimed.

Not only men but also women themselves rationalize the unequal division of labor skewed toward women within the household, thus underscoring dominant discourses of masculinity and femininity. Many male respondents in the study believed that women should do most of housework "because they are more skillful in this area." Additionally, some men assume that this type of work is more appropriate for women because they are unable to perform what men can do. In the same fashion, female respondents often worry that men's sense of masculinity would be harmed if they have to do the supposedly 'feminine' works. This perception, in

Oakley’s view, explain well why men either do not get involved in most of domestic work or provide just little ‘help’ so that “their masculinity will survive” (1979). In turn, this pattern of labor allocation, or division, enhances the traditional norms of masculinity and femininity that institutionalize the dependent role of women onto their husbands and their families-in-law. This gendered relationship governs other social relations as well as other aspects of life among all family members.

We argue that women have continued to do more domestic work since the market reform in the mid-1980s. As households have become the autonomous economic unit, each household has to reallocate labor among family members, especially between husband and wife, in order to fulfill the functions of the family in the new economic situation. However, it is obvious that this reorganization and reallocation of household labor has enhanced the traditional culture, and this gendered relationship governs other social relations as well as other aspects of life among family members.

As mentioned above, the rapid feminization of the labor force has been recorded by the state’s official data, but this fact is not likely to be accompanied by any greater equity or sharing of labor within individual families. On the contrary, in Vietnam the intense focus on the household unit as the drive of economic growth means that women are even more likely to be burdened with the double bind of acquiring paid employment while having to maintain their existing roles as domestic providers and laborers. These ‘womanly roles’ are even applauded by the organizations respecting women’s interests and benefits as a means to protect the intactness of families in the whirlwind of burgeoning development (Bui, 2006). To make the situation even worse, the national mass media products uninterruptedly convey messages regarding traditional gender roles. For example, Dinh Doan, a media commentator, has emphasized the socially-sanctioned roles of men and women and especially their decisive characteristics of role fulfillment in correlation with ideas surrounding family well-being (2007). In his words,

A husband and his wife should be a “magical alliance,” but not “a mutual help group” or “a collective.” This may explain why counting the benefits and losses do not have any position/standing in a happy family. A clearly-cut labor division timetable which states what tasks a husband and a wife should do in the family is an unhealthy proof of a conjugal life... Doing household chores is not always satisfactory. However, it is said that “Men make house, women make home.” Women therefore should “keep the fire in the family.” You, women should remember that the possibility of taking care of husband and children is one of the greatest happiness that many other women have been longing

for. Do not forget that the emotional fire that you light will both “keep yourself warm and others warm as well.” (Dinh Doan, Newspaper of Science and Life, 3 September 2007).

Consequently, women today have to bear excessive burdens in order to achieve the title of “superwoman” who is good at both office work and housework. This double standard requires Vietnamese women to sacrifice further their health, their youth, and spare time.

Monetary value of housework

As mentioned earlier, another objective of this inquiry is to calculate the economic value of domestic labor in order to have a fuller insight and evaluation regarding the contribution of this type of unpaid work.

| Sites | Monthly | Hourly (240hr/month) |
|-------------|-----------|----------------------|
| Nguyen Trai | 1,687,893 | 7,033 |
| Dai Dong | 832,840 | 3,470 |

In the research, we adopted the two models of opportunity cost (the household’s average income) and market replacement cost (the housekeeper cost method) to measure the monetary value of domestic labor. The first model is based on the premise that when an individual engages in unpaid work, he or she has to give up activities that could be done instead along with all associated monetary and non-monetary benefits (Malika Hamdad 2003). However, it should be noted that different people performing the same household task can be paid at vastly different rates because each person has a different job and therefore a different wage rate. Table 2 presents monthly and hourly average income of husbands and wives in the two study sites. The large difference of incomes between the two sites should be noted. Overall, people in Nguyen Trai sub-district (urban area) earn much higher than their counterparts in Dai Dong commune (rural area).

Table 3 shows that if a wife in Nguyen Trai spends in average about six hours on housework she will earn about 40 thousand VND a day and nearly 1.2 million a month. This is quite close to her monthly income actually made by remunerated work. Similarly, a wife in Dai Dong can earn more than half of a million VND per month, or about two third of her paid work.

Table 3: Measurement of Domestic Labor Value Based on Average Income of Female Respondents at Study Sites (Unit: VND)

| Study sites | Work hours per day | Wage rate per hour | Monetary value per day | Monetary value per month |
|-------------|--------------------|--------------------|------------------------|--------------------------|
| Nguyen Trai | 5.66 | 7,033 | 39,806 | 1,194,185 |
| Dai Dong | 5.09 | 3,470 | 17,663 | 529,894 |

If the hourly wages are derived from the household’s income groups, we will have an understanding of housework values in range. As illustrated by Table 4, the hourly wage of a woman in the lowest income group (less than 500 thousand VND per month) is just about 396VND. Her time spent on housework per month will thus be priced about 59,000VND. At the same time, a woman in the second income group (from 501,000-2,000,000VND) can earn about 422,000VND per month from about 5 hour domestic labor at the hourly wage rate of more than 2,500VND. In the same way, a woman in the higher income group will have a higher hourly wage and the value of her time spent on housework will be greater.

Table 4: Measurement of Domestic Labor Value Based on Income Groups (Unit: VND)

| Income group | Monthly average income | Hourly average income | Number of hours doing housework/day | Monetary value of housework per day | Monetary value of housework per month |
|----------------------|------------------------|-----------------------|-------------------------------------|-------------------------------------|---------------------------------------|
| Below 500,000 | 95,140 | 396 | 4.95 | 1,960 | 58,806 |
| 501,000–2,000,000 | 641,352 | 2,672 | 5.30 | 14,083 | 422,491 |
| 2,001,000–5,000,000 | 1,403,183 | 5,847 | 5.54 | 32,390 | 971,704 |
| 5,001,000–10,000,000 | 2,402,879 | 10,012 | 5.20 | 52,162 | 1,564,875 |
| Above 10,000,000 | 7,633,333 | 31,806 | 4.56 | 145,033 | 4,351,000 |

The second model of valuation of domestic labor is market replacement cost. This model presupposes that housework can be valued in monetary term based on the market prices of the same services, with an assumption that household members and their ‘replacements’ are equally productive and responsible. Another premise behind this approach is that households save money by deciding to perform the activities themselves. The amount they save, and hence the value added to the household’s income by doing housework, is the cost of purchasing the same services in the market, or hiring someone else to perform the tasks (Hamdad, 2003).

This approach is divided into two other variants: (1) replacement cost which imputes unpaid work on the basis of earnings of people employed in matched occupations; and (2) housekeeper cost method which employs the wage rate of a general housekeeper. However,

it is important to remember that market replacements are not likely to exist for all household activities, and there are likely to be a wide range of wage rates for the same task being undertaken by different people in the market. In addition, there will still be a number of household productive tasks that a housekeeper would be unlikely to carry out, and applying the single wage rate could lead to inappropriate valuations (Hamdad 2003).

As previously mentioned, there are only 33 households (11%) in the study sample that hired people to do housework. On average, a household in Nguyen Trai paid 390,960VND per month and a household in Dai Dong paid 251,000VND for hire of a housework performer. Accordingly, the hourly wage rates in Nguyen Trai and Dai Dong are 1,629 VND and 1,046 VND respectively. If this hourly wage rates are used as the basis for valuation of housework, a wife in Nguyen Trai would produce 276,000VND in housework value and a wife in Dai Dong would produce 160,000VND per month (see Table 5).

| Study site | Hours of housework per day | Monetary value of housework per hour | Monetary value of housework per day | Monetary value of housework per month |
|-------------|----------------------------|--------------------------------------|-------------------------------------|---------------------------------------|
| Nguyen Trai | 5.66 | 1,629 VND | 9,220.1VND | 276,604.2 VND |
| Dai Dong | 5.09 | 1,046 VND | 5,324.1VND | 159,724.2VND |

If we measure the value of domestic labor based on the average wage rate for general housekeepers in the study sites, a woman in Nguyen Trai can produce over 400,000 VND and a woman in Dai Dong can produce about 250,000VND in value of housework per month (see Table 6). However, this estimation is far from perfect because it is probably impossible to use the wage rate of a general housekeeper to calculate the value of the time household members spent on housework. Clearly, the working conditions, productivity and responsibilities of the replacements are qualitatively quite different in nature. As expressed by one respondent, “not all of the domestic tasks are possible to be placed at an economic value. For instance, as far as care for her children is concerned, it is not possible to hire somebody in to look after them with the same responsibility and affection as their parents.”

Table 6: Measurement of the Value of Domestic Labor Based on the Average Wage Rate for the General Housekeeper in the Study Sites

| Study site | Hours of housework per day | Monetary value of housework per hour | Monetary value of housework per day | Monetary value of housework per month |
|-------------|----------------------------|--------------------------------------|-------------------------------------|---------------------------------------|
| Nguyen Trai | 5.66 | 2,500VND | 14,150VND | 424,500VND |
| Dai Dong | 5.09 | 1,667VND | 8,485VND | 254,551 VND |

Conclusion

In this paper, we argued that, like in every other society, housework and domestic labor play an important role in both family’s and community’s life in Vietnam. Even at the national and international level, domestic work can have enormous economic value. Yet, housework in many countries is much gendered and disproportionately burdens women. In fact, it is perceived as a form of patriarchal oppression. Many international women’s conferences and forums, which were organized in Mexico in 1975, Copenhagen in 1980, Nairobi in 1985, and in Beijing in 1995, have addressed women’s “housework function”. At these conferences and forums, a consensus was reached that this gendered perception made women’s contribution invisible to development as a whole. This is confirmed by the Human Development Report 1995 stating that many of women’s economic contributions are grossly undervalued or not valued at all despite the fact that they are estimated as \$11 trillion worth a year. In its sense, the serious underestimation of women’s economic contribution to development limits its social recognition. Therefore, if housework is taken into account in the mainstream economics, it is possible to better understand income distribution as well as to give visibility to women’s work. This will be a step further towards gender equality and achieve more comprehensive estimates of the level of economic activity (Aslaksen and Koren 1996; CWS 2006; Monsod 2007).

The research shows that in Vietnam men and, more often than not, women themselves assume housework to be women’s natural proclivity. This is partly because of their gender socialization through which gender ideology is constructed, where individuals internalize how to behave in gender-appropriate ways. A number of scholars have, however, affirmed that those tasks have nothing to do with an individual’s sex, gender or age. Nevertheless, this popular cultural understanding is not easily eradicated despite the fact that socialist propaganda for the last 50 years often stressed the government’s concern to achieve gender equality, the high

participation of women in economic activities as well as impressive achievement in education of women themselves. Not only gender continues to influence household labor allocation but household also function as “gender factory” in which not only goods and services, but also gender, are created through the allocation of household tasks (Coltrane 2000; Davis 2007).

Ironically, the state is now joining force with the tradition to further disempower women under the rubric of protecting so-called ‘Vietnamese cultural values’ for the sake of national unity. Gendered social harmony in which traditional family is the central core is promoted and even institutionalized through policies. Gender inequality is daily enshrined by the state-controlled mass media through messages hooraying traditional gender roles. Pressures from family to society is up for women to achieve the decorative identity of “modern” women who should be “good at public work and capable of housework, striving for the objectives of gender equality,” as propagandized by the Vietnamese Women Union. The imposition of this new role on women has in fact placed them in a dilemma that they should either fail to be “modern” women respected by their family and society or should have “three heads and six hands” to complete all these tasks at the expense of good health, equal opportunities, and individual freedom.

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